

# ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

## mystery magazine

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# Finger Exercise

BY JACK RITCHIE



It was Sergeant Winiewski's case, but he was going on his vacation so Captain Wilberforce transferred it to Ralph and me.

He studied us for a while. "I still can't understand how the hell the two of you ever got the best record in homicide."

I smiled deprecatingly. "We miss a few here and there, sir."

Wilberforce grunted. "Before Edward Weaver died, he used his own blood to scrawl the initials of his murderer on the rug."

Ralph frowned thoughtfully. "Why didn't he use a pen or a pencil?"

"I don't know," Wilberforce said. "I suppose at a time like that some victims have the tendency to panic and forget the logical thing to do."

I nodded. "What makes us so certain that the initials are those of Weaver's murderer?"

"Why else would he be writing bloody initials at a time like that?" Wilberforce puffed his cigar. "The initials are P.M., but we can't seem to tie them to anybody connected with the case."

I savored the letters. "P.M.? Post Meridian? Prime Minister? Provost Marshall? Para-mutual? Pontifex Maximus?" I shook my head.

Wilberforce continued. "The murder took place some time between eight and ten-thirty last night. No one seems to have heard the shot, but that was probably because those small-caliber weapons don't make much noise. It was either a .22 or a .25. We didn't find the gun and we haven't got the ballistics or coroner's reports yet. And besides, Weaver had a stack of classical records running on his stereo. For all we know, he could have got clobbered during the *Hallelujah Chorus*."

Ralph brightened. "The *Hallelujah Chorus* is one of my favorites, but I can never remember the words."

Wilberforce worked a few more puffs out of his cigar. "Weaver entered his study at eight o'clock. Across the hall, in the drawing room, his wife Bertha, her two grown children, Irving and Diana, and Hiram Basswood, a lawyer and friend of the family, played bridge from eight until approximately ten-thirty. They had a clear view of the study door. No one entered or left the study during that time. When they broke up the game at ten-thirty, Basswood knocked on the study door and entered to tell Weaver that he was leaving. He found the body and the initials. It looks like whoever shot Weaver got into the study through the French windows leading to the terrace. He might even have been let in by Weaver himself."

I pondered the steeple I'd made with my fingertips. "Couldn't one of the people playing bridge—while he or she was dummy, for instance—have run outside the house, gained admittance to the study via the French windows, shot Weaver, and then rejoined the players with no one the wiser?"

"Possibly," Wilberforce said encouragingly. "But what about the initials P.M.? They must mean something, but they don't seem to apply to any of the bridge players."

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When Captain Wilberforce finished briefing us, Ralph and I went to our car and drove to Hiram Basswood's law office downtown.

Basswood, a short trim-bearded man who reminded me of General Grant, led us into his private office and closed the door.

"We have just been assigned to this case," I said. "Tell us exactly what happened last night."

He shrugged. "Nothing much to tell. Bertha, Diana, Irving and I played bridge from about eight until ten-thirty, when we broke up the game. I went to the study to tell Edward I was leaving and there he was, lying on the floor dead."

"And the initials?" I asked. "P.M.? Do they mean anything to you?"

Basswood shook his head. "All I can think of is Pasquale Mancini. He was an Italian statesman and jurist who died in 1888, so I suppose that gives him a solid alibi. I did a paper on him in college."

"Edward Weaver didn't play bridge?" I asked.

"No. He didn't care for cards of any kind. He just disappeared into his study, as he usually does when we play, to work or read or do whatever people do in studies these days."

"Was the study door open or closed?"

"Closed."

"Did you or anyone touch the body or anything else in the room?"

"Absolutely nothing. It was obvious to all of us that Edward was beyond resuscitation."

"You are a friend of the family?"

Basswood nodded. "I've known Edward and Bertha all my life. This was Bertha's second marriage, you know. Her first husband died five years ago."

"Did anyone of you leave the bridge table at any time last evening?" I asked.

"I suppose so." Basswood rubbed his beard. "Obviously Edward was murdered by this P.M. person. He must have gained entrance through the French windows, shot Edward, and then fled."

Ralph nodded. "How did Mrs. Weaver's first husband die?"

"He was killed by a hit-and-run driver. The police never did find him."

When Ralph and I were through with Basswood, we drove on to the Weaver residence north of the city on the Lake Shore Drive. The gravel driveway wound through two acres of trees and ended in a circle

before a large French Provincial house. A female servant answered the door and led us through the house to the garden.

Mrs. Bertha Weaver wore a broad-brimmed straw hat. She smiled "You're detectives? Whatever happened to that nice Sergeant Wisniewski?"

"He's on vacation," Ralph said. "He wanted to be in Door County when the cherry blossoms bloomed."

Bertha Weaver was a striking woman in her forties. A small garden cart beside her was nearly filled with cut flowers.

"I'm making a wreath for Edward's funeral," she said. "I suppose I could buy one, but I like the personal touch. I'm not quite sure how to go about it though. The library has absolutely nothing on the subject of funeral wreaths."

"How large an estate did your husband leave?" I asked.

"Two or three million dollars. I don't have a head for figures."

"And who are the beneficiaries?" I asked.

"Edward left it all in percentages. I receive fifty percent, Irving and Diana twenty each. And Hiram ten."

Ralph turned to Bertha Weaver. "Does the name Pasquale Mancini mean anything to you?"

She shook her head. "No. But now I remember something about the initials P.M. Paula Marquand. She was Edward's secretary, but she quit her job a couple of months before I married Edward. She claimed she could type over eighty words a minute. I'd say it was nearer forty, though Edward didn't seem to care."

"Paula Marquand?" I said briskly. "We'll put out an All Points Bulletin immediately."

"Henry," Ralph said, "why don't we try the phone book first?"

Paula Marquand's address proved to be 167 N. Park, a four-story apartment building. As we entered the foyer, a tall man sporting a white ten-gallon hat and cowboy boots passed us on his way out.

We took the elevator up, pressed the buzzer at door 311 and waited.

"If she's a working girl," Ralph said, "she's probably not home."

The door opened on its chain. "Who are you?"

Ralph and I showed our identification. "We'd like to ask you a few questions," I said.

"About what?"

"About the death of Edward Weaver."

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"Oh?" she said. "Eddie's dead? How come?"

"He was murdered," Ralph said. "But before he died, he managed to . . ."

"Ralph," I said firmly, "we'll get to that."

She unfastened the chain and let us inside. Paula Marquand was tall, grey-eyed and wore a long dressing gown. "When did it happen?" she asked.

"Edward Weaver was, killed sometime between eight-thirty and ten o'clock last night," I said. "How long did you work for Edward Weaver?"

"About a year."

"And you quit two months before Edward Weaver married the present Mrs. Weaver?"

She stifled a yawn. "I got a better job offer."

"Miss Marquand," Ralph said sternly, "before Edward Weaver died, he scrawled the initials P.M. on the rug in his own life blood."

She raised an eyebrow. "Oh? But there must be *oodles* of P.M.s in the world." She smiled sweetly. "You'll never send me to the chair on that kind of evidence."

"We don't have capital punishment in this state," Ralph said. "Of course some states still sentence people to death, but nowadays that's just an emotional outlet for outraged citizens. Actually, the chances of anyone going to the chair anymore are practically . . ."

"Miss Marquand," I said, "were you *fond* of Edward Weaver? Did you have expectations?"

"Expectations? You mean was I trying to hook him? Sure. I was working on it. After all, a man with that kind of money doesn't float onto the scene every day. But I guess I played it too slow and coy or he just preferred the mature type. When this Bertha What's-her-name came along, I could see the handwriting on the wall."

"Ah," I said, "so you *were* the woman scorned? You *were* wounded and bitter when he married Bertha What's-her-name?"

Ralph pursued the point. "Wounded and bitter enough to kill?"

"If I was, why would I wait two years to kill him?"

"You could be a slow burner," Ralph said. "Do you have any Norwegian blood?"

"Miss Marquand," I said, "can you account for your time between eight and ten-thirty last night?"

"I thought you'd never ask. Last night my boss took me to the



Highway Builders' banquet in Madison. And Madison is at least seventy-five miles from here."

Ralph eyed her skeptically. "Can you prove that? I mean about being at the banquet, not the mileage to Madison."

She sighed. "Look, my boss is president of the organization this year. He and I sat on a raised platform with the other officers and their wives or whoever. Dinner was served at seven-thirty, the speeches began at eight-thirty and the meeting didn't adjourn until after ten. I didn't leave the platform even to powder my nose. Over two hundred guests could testify to that. I can even give you a membership list if you want it."

"Who is your boss?" Ralph asked.

"Tex Kastenmeister of Kastenmeister Construction. Tex was born and raised in Sheboygan, but he has this thing about cowboy boots and hats. He even wears them . . ." She stifled a yawn. "Oh, you'll have to pardon me, I've been having trouble getting enough sleep lately."

Ralph nodded sympathetically. "This is your day off?"

"You might say that."

When we got back to our car, I said, "For my money, one of those four bridge players killed Weaver."

"Then why did Weaver go through all that trouble making the initials P.M.?"

"We've been looking only for the obvious P.M.s. Weaver could have been referring to a nickname or something of that nature."

We returned to the Weaver residence and this time found Bertha Weaver in the drawing room amid heaps of cut flowers. The small violet-eyed girl with her proved to be Diana Weaver.

They were engaged in the process of unravelling wire coat hangers. "Personally, Mother," Diana said, "I don't think this is going to work. The wire keeps breaking."

"Mrs. Weaver," I said, "I understand that your first husband died in a hit-and-run accident."

"Yes," she said. "Three years ago. In June, I believe."

"No, Mother," Diana said, "it was August. I remember because it happened the week after I got my driver's license."

Bertha Weaver smiled at her daughter fondly. "Diana's been elected chairperson of her Women's Lib Action Group. She's even written a fight song entitled, 'I Am Person'."

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Ralph cleared his throat. "Actually, the word 'person' is itself chauvinistic. I mean, it comes in two parts, 'per' and 'son', and 'son' is obviously male."

Diana frowned. "I never realized that. The whole word is condescending and probably degrading. Why do we have to take male words and put prefixes on them, like *woman* and *female*? Can't we have root words of our very own?"

Ralph nodded. "My wife says that before true equality in the matter of sexes can be attained, whole languages will have to be overhauled and genders thrown out. After all, what justification is there for making a table masculine and a chair feminine?"

"Mrs. Weaver," I said, "how long have you known Hiram Basswood?"

"Practically all my life. I first met him in dancing school. You wouldn't believe it today, but his version of the Big Apple brought down the house at one of Miss Plimsol's semi-annual recitals."

"Hiram's quite fond of you," Diana said. "I wouldn't be at all surprised if your next . . ."

Bertha Weaver blushed. "Let's not talk about that now, Diana. At least not until the wreath is finished."

"Where can I find your son Irving?" I asked.

"He's upstairs in his room working on his master's thesis," Diana said. "It's on the latent heterosexuality of Oscar Wilde."

Ralph and I followed her directions and found Irving before a portable typewriter, staring at a blank sheet of paper and eating potato chips.

Ralph and I showed him our identification. He stared at mine. "Henry Turnbuckle?"

I nodded proudly. "A name as old as hardware."

Irving was well over six and a half feet tall, but probably weighed less than one hundred and fifty pounds. He offered us potato chips. "These come in a tubular container. Compared to them, other chips just don't stack up."

I thought they tasted a bit bland. "Does anyone in this household have any nicknames, terms of endearment or whatever?"

Irving gave it thought. "I understand that my mother called me Dindin until I was almost five years old. Or was it the dog? I don't really remember."



"By the way," I said cleverly, "your surname isn't really Weaver, is it?"

"No. My father's last name was Carson."

I frowned thoughtfully. "And what was your mother's *maiden* name?"

"Swandon." He wiped his fingers on a piece of typing paper. "Sorry I can't come up with anything helpful, but P.M. just doesn't seem to apply to any one of us."

"My mother called me Bootie," Ralph said.

I blinked. "Why?"

"Because I swallowed one of them. Luckily it passed through."

A maid appeared at the door. "There is a Captain Wilberforce on the phone and he would like to speak to a Sergeant Turnbuckle."

She led Ralph and me to an extension in the next room, where I picked up the receiver. "Henry," Captain Wilberforce said, "ballistics says that the murder weapon was caliber .25. But more important is the coroner's report. Edward Weaver couldn't possibly have scrawled those initials on the rug."

"Why not?"

"The coroner is absolutely certain that Weaver died instantly."

When I hung up, I conveyed the information to Ralph.

He frowned. "Then who *did* make those letters? And why?"

"The 'why' is simple. To throw us off the track."

Ralph sighed. "I'd hate to think that one of those four suspects killed Edward Weaver. They all seem like pretty nice people. Level-headed."

"It has to be one of them," I said. "Who else is there?"

"Why couldn't it have been some stranger? An intruder? A burglar?"

"Ralph," I said. "You're trying to take the easy way out. Do you realize how many murders have gone unsolved because some naive detective preferred to blame an intruder?"

"How many?" Ralph asked.

"I don't have the figures with me at the moment. But it is impressive. Besides, would a burglar break into a lighted room that has a person inside it? Anyway, nothing was reported missing."

"Couldn't the burglar have broken into the house earlier in the evening and hidden himself in the study behind something or other? He was going to burglarize the house when everybody was asleep. But

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Weaver accidentally discovered his hiding place, and the intruder shot Weaver and fled into the night."

"Ralph," I said, "before this burglar fled into the night, why did he stop and scrawl the initials P.M. on the rug?"

Ralph sighed and we returned to Irving's room.

I studied him. "What were you wearing last night?"

He thought about it. "I had on a knit T-shirt and slacks."

"Are you wearing them now?"

"Well, not the T-shirt, as you can see. But the same slacks, yes."

I smiled. "Last night one of you four bridge players left the game, sneaked outside, entered the study, and shot Edward Weaver."

Irving listened politely.

"And this same person, this same murderer, scrawled the initials P.M. on the rug in order to throw suspicion not only from himself, but from anyone else in the household. The letters P.M. in themselves mean nothing." I smiled again "But beyond that, what do we have?"

"I don't know," Ralph said. "What do we have?"

"We have a murderer with blood on his finger or fingers."

Irving and Ralph examined their fingers.

I continued. "And when a murderer has blood on his finger or fingers, what must he do about that blood?"

Ralph came up with the answer immediately. "He has to wipe that blood off. Right? So he picked up a piece of scrap paper, wiped his finger or fingers, and threw the paper into the wastebasket. I'll go down to the study and look for it."

"Never mind, Ralph," I said. "If the murderer discarded the paper in the study, I am certain it would have been found by our technicians. No, Ralph, the murderer *did* use something to wipe the blood from his fingers, but he did not leave that something at the scene of the crime. After all, if we found it, we would certainly deduce that someone besides Weaver made those initials. A dying man may conceivably scrawl those initials on the rug, but he would hardly be so neat as to wipe his fingers and toss the paper into the wastebasket. Besides, Weaver's fingers had already been dipped into his own blood as part of this vile plot and had to remain in that sanguine condition."

"No, Ralph, the murderer wiped his fingers on something—either a piece of paper or a handkerchief—and put that something into his pocket—or purse—and disposed of it later."

Ralph mulled that over. "But if he got rid of it, what good does it do for us to know about it now?"

I turned to Irving. "Will you please turn your pockets inside out?"

Irving shrugged and emptied the contents of his pockets on his desk.

Ralph examined them. "I don't see anything suspicious."

"There's no handkerchief, Ralph," I said.

Irving scratched his chin. "I simply forgot to put one in my pocket. It happens all the time."

"Ralph," I said, "if one puts a bloody handkerchief—or the equivalent—into one's pocket, the chances are exceedingly good that the *inside* of that pocket will become stained with blood." I pointed to Irving's everted right hand pocket. "I see stains there, Irving. Do you suppose they are blood?"

He looked down quickly. "Catsup stains. Yesterday at lunch I picked up one of those free-flowing bottles of catsup by mistake and got it all over. I used my handkerchief to wipe my fingers and threw it away after I left the restaurant."

I regarded him with grim relentlessness. "Our laboratory will soon determine whether that is catsup or blood, sir. Also we will delve under your fingernails. No doubt some traces of that 'catsup' still remain. Do you persist in denying that there is human blood on your pocket lining?"

Irving slowly munched several potato chips while he thought.

I pressed on. "You created those initials to throw the police off the track. Any special reason for using the letters P.M.?"

He finally sighed. "Because I didn't want to get anybody I knew into trouble and I didn't know anybody who had the initials P.M."

"Then you admit murdering your stepfather?"

Irving massaged his neck. "I refuse to say anything more until I've seen a lawyer."

"Ah ha," I said. "Ralph, read him his rights."

That done, we ushered Irving downstairs, where we found Mrs. Weaver and Diana still at work. Hiram Basswood had evidently just joined them.

They stared at us while I explained why I was taking Irving to headquarters.

Bertha Weaver turned to Hiram Basswood. "Hiram, do you deal in criminal law?"

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Hiram drew himself up. "Irving won't need a lawyer. I am responsible for those initials beside the corpse. Only the initials I made were F.M. Why did you close the prongs of my F, Irving?"

Irving colored a bit. "Because there's this girl. Freda McCarthy. An undergraduate. Center of the university's girls' basketball team. Nice eyes. Terrific personality. Six foot three. We've had a couple of dates and we find that we have a lot in common. I've heard how thorough the police can be and I thought that eventually the F.M. might somehow incriminate her. So I changed the F to a P."

I regarded Hiram Basswood skeptically. "Just one moment, sir. Are you wearing the same suit you were wearing last night at the time of the murder?"

He looked down at his trousers. "Yes. Why?"

"Then let me see the bloodstains on the lining of your pocket, sir."

He raised an eyebrow. "Why should I have bloodstains on my pocket lining?"

I smiled. "If you truly created these alleged initials F.M., then *how* did you get rid of the blood on your fingers?"

"There's a goldfish bowl in the study. I just swished my hand back and forth a few times until I washed off the blood."

"Very well," I said stiffly. "So you murdered Edward Weaver and then created the initials as a diversion?"

Basswood's eyes went from Bertha, to Irving, to Diana. "Edward was already dead when I entered the study."

"Ah," I said, "and you immediately realized that one of the people at the bridge table had to have committed the crime, and in an effort to protect that murderer or murderess, you quickly scrawled those initials with Weaver's own blood."

Bertha Weaver smiled. "How sweet of you trying to protect us, Hiram." Her eyes became thoughtful. "The more I think about it, the more I realize that *none* of us left that bridge table during the entire evening. Isn't that absolutely right, children?" Irving quickly agreed and Diana nodded. "Not a single one of us left the table. And that includes Hiram."

"Ha," I said scornfully, "then why did Hiram Basswood think that he had to scrawl those initials, if all of you had perfect alibis?" I regarded them sternly. "I would advise all of you to think your words over carefully. We on the police force have our ways of getting inexorably to the

naked truth and when we do there will be hell to pay and three indictments for obstruction of justice."

The phone rang and Bertha Weaver picked it up. She listened for a moment. "It's for you, Sergeant Turnbuckle."

I decided to take the call in the study and Ralph followed me.

I removed the extension from its cradle. "Turnbuckle here."

"How are you doing, Henry?" Captain Wilberforce asked.

I smiled. "I am confident that I will wrap up this case in a matter of hours."

"That's nice, Henry," Wilberforce said. "But I wouldn't be in too much of a hurry. Last night one of our cars picked up a drunk. The boys would have put him in a taxi and sent him home but they found he was carrying a gun. So they brought him in and we ran a make. His name is Opie Bronson and he has a long record of breaking and entering. We ran a test on the gun, a .25. Guess what we found?"

I closed my eyes and waited.

"It turns out that the bullet that killed Edward Weaver came out of Opie's gun. We talked to Opie about it and maybe the hangover helped, but he decided to confess. He broke into the Weaver place and hid in the study with the intention of burglarizing the house when everybody was asleep. Weaver stumbled across him and Opie panicked. He shot Weaver and got the hell out of there. Opie was drinking to forget what he did."

I hung up, went to the French windows, and stared out at the terrace. The damned intruder probably fled through this very window.

"What did the captain say?" Ralph asked.

"Ralph," I said, "how many homicides have you and I solved?"

"Twenty-seven."

"How many have we failed to solve?"

"Four."

"And how many were wolved for us?"

"Five."

"No, Ralph, it is now six."

Ralph rummaged through the liquor cabinet until he found a bottle of sherry.

I downed three stiff fingers, squared my shoulders, and marched into the drawing room to tell the suspects that I would no longer be needing them.

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